

SESSION 5: The Author of Life

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 19-21:

WCF	WLC	WSC
3	12-14	7-8

Introduction

In our last session, we looked at what our standards teach about the being and attributes of God. In this session, we explore what can (and what cannot) be known about the eternal plan of God. In his speech at Solomon's Portico, the apostle Peter described the Lord Jesus as "the Author of Life." In this title there is both inexhaustible glory – and profound mystery.

Totality and Mystery

Our standards describe God's eternal plan for the universe in terms that reflect both its *totality* and its *mystery*:

1. God's plan is total:
 - a. "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass..." (WCF 3.1)
 - b. "Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future..." (WCF 3.2)
 - c. "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death." (WCF 3.3)
 - d. "These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished." (WCF 3.4)
 - e. "As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto." (WCF 3.6)
2. God's plan contains mystery:
 - a. "...yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." (WCF 3.1)
 - b. "The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice." (WCF 3.7)

Given these parameters, we should pay careful attention to the opening words of the final paragraph: "the doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care," (WCF 3.8). We are on sacred ground, and must tread carefully.

The Author and the Book: An Analogy

As a starting point to wrestling with both the totality and mystery of God's eternal plan, the present author knows no better analogy than the relationship between an author and the book he creates. How does an author relate to the world, characters, and action he or she creates? The most basic fact in this relationship is that *the author is "metaphysically transcendent" to – he or she exists above, outside, and over – the created universe of the story.*

This fact, which is true of all works of fiction, helps us understand two important aspects of the author-book relationship. First, it helps us understand how an author can be totally in control and characters can be truly free *at the same time*. Second, it helps us understand how the story can contain real evil *without making the author guilty*.

Consider, for example, the famous novels of J.R.R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*) or J.K. Rowling (*Harry Potter*). Each story takes the reader into its own self-contained world. Within the horizon of that world, each character acts freely and chooses to do good or to do evil. Never in either narrative do we read a description of tiny strings connected to Bilbo or Harry, Saruman or Voldemort, that made them act contrary to their desires. Within the covers of the book, each character acts truly and freely according to their nature. They are 100% responsible for their actions, because what they choose to do is 100% their choice.

At the same time, the human authors Tolkien and Rowling exercise 100% total control over every detail and event in the story. Everything that happens in each narrative occurs only because they planned it to happen. Nothing occurs that isn't part of their plan for the story. This 100% sovereignty of the author is no contradiction to the 100% responsibility of the characters because it, like the authors themselves, exists and operates at a level *above the horizon of the story world and outside the covers of the book*.

This distinction between the author and the book also gives us an inkling as to how stories can contain real evil without making the authors guilty. Within the books covers, some characters perform actions that are intrinsically evil and spring from evil motives – for example, the depredations of the orcs or the murders of Voldemort. Yet when we look at the actions of the authors above, outside, and over the story, planning all these actions for the purpose of accomplishing an ultimately good purpose, who can accuse Tolkien or Rowling of moral evil?

Though no analogy is perfect (see the next section), the present author believes this analogy is the closest to helping us see the relationship between the totality and the mystery of God's eternal plan. God is the author of all creation: "in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them," (Psalm 139.16). Yet God is not the author of sin: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one," (James 1.13). As Solomon expresses it, "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes," (Ecclesiastes 7.29).

Qualifications and Demonstrations

In explaining this section of our standards, Chad Van Dixhoorn offers three important qualifiers:

God did 'unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass', but this comprehensive statement requires three qualifying fences lest we should wander in directions that would prove dangerous. The first fence keeps out the idea that God could ever be the 'author of sin'.... The second fence is almost as important as the first... God's ordaining of whatsoever comes to pass does not do 'violence' to the will of men and women.... The third protective fence is that God's plan still employs real secondary causes... the liberty or freedom of these causes is real; the contingency or possibility of these events is not taken away... All events – even those events which we see as secondary causes – are also part of God's decree, and so God's decree establishes these causes and events too.⁴⁵

Beyond these qualifications, Van Dixhoorn points us to two passages of Scripture that together show the complete conjunction of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. During the judicial

⁴⁵ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 44-46.

proceedings prior to Christ's crucifixion, there is an informative private scene between the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and the Lord Jesus:

[Pilate] entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." (John 19:9-11)

In these words, our Lord makes it clear that Pilate's power – the very power that would shortly condone the murder of God's own Son – came from God's own hand. Making it even more clear, Peter says in his sermon at Pentecost:

"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." (Acts 2:22-24)

The Bible clearly teaches that God is 100% in control. It also clearly teaches that human beings are 100% responsible. If the question is put, "Is God sovereign, or is man free?" – the only answer we can give is, "Yes."

Predestination and Reprobation

With this mystery in view and this tension acknowledged, we must carefully note the distinction which our standards make between God's plan to save some (*predestination*) and his decision to "pass by" the rest of mankind and "ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin," (WCF 3.7).

In God's eternal plan, Adam and Eve would freely choose, by their sin, to set the entire human race on the road to hell. Every one of their naturally conceived offspring is, from the moment of birth, moving toward destruction. Without divine intervention, the damnation of every such person is assured. This is the reality of the fall of mankind.

In this same eternal plan, God freely choose to rescue a fixed number of men and women in Christ. "Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory," (WCF 3.5). Yet a fallen human being, even an elect one, will not turn themselves away from sin to God. Therefore, "as God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto," (WCF 3.6). Thus *predestination* – a decision to save even one – commits God to *definite and dramatic intervention*.

In the case of the non-elect, however, God simply declines to intervene. He determines to "pass by" (*preterition*) "and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin," (*condemnation*). This is what is known as *reprobation* (from the Latin *reprobare*, which means "to disapprove"). People are *not* sent to hell because God passed by them. They are sent to hell because their sins deserve God's wrath. God's passing by them simply ensures that they will get what they deserve. So while preterition ensures condemnation, it is not the ground of it.

This distinction between *predestination* (intervention to ensure salvation) and *reprobation* (non-intervention resulting in damnation) is crucially important. In the former, God acts "to the praise of His glorious grace," (WCF 3.5); in the latter, "to the praise of His glorious justice," (WCF 3.7).

The Objection

In the face of the Bible's teaching about predestination and reprobation, many object. "It isn't fair," we are told. And if we're honest, most of us feel at least some of the force of this objection. But the universality of this objection is itself a clue. Remember: *behind every hard question is a hidden assumption*. That is especially true here. When we object to election, we are implicitly assuming the right to judge God. *Complaining that God gets to play God betrays our own inner grasping after his job*. Ever since the Garden of Eden, this has been the sin underneath all others (cf. Genesis 3.5).

Van Dixhoorn's response is apt: "Recall the conclusion of one of Jesus' parables, where the owner of the vineyard is criticized for injustice, and he responds with a question that exposes the critics' jealousy of his generosity... 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' (Matthew 20.8; see also Romans 9.14-15)"⁴⁶

Our Duty

At the beginning of this session, we noted our standards' admonishment that "the doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care," (WCF 3.8). We conclude with two final observations.

First, we must take care that we never permit our belief in predestination to excuse any dereliction in our *duty*. The Bible *reveals* that God has decreed some for everlasting life and some for eternal wrath. Yet at the same time the Bible *commands* us to take the gospel to all individuals and nations. A.A. Hodge offers a helpful distinction here: "While the principle of sovereign election as lying at the foundation of all grace is thus clearly revealed, the election or non-election of particular persons is not revealed in the Scriptures. The preceptive and not the decretive will of God is the rule of human duty."⁴⁷

Put another way, the Bible sets alongside the reality of predestination the reality of the free offer of the gospel. In his commentary on Edward Fisher's *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, Thomas Boston writes:

Even as when one presents a piece of gold to a poor man saying, "Take it, it is yours"; the offer makes the piece really his in the sense and to the effect before declared; nevertheless, while the poor man does not accept or receive it; whether apprehending the offer too great to be real, or that he has no liking of the necessary consequents of the accepting; it is not his in possession, nor hath he the benefit of it; but, on the contrary, must starve for it all, and that so much the more miserably, that he hath slighted the offer and refused the gift... Now what this gospel report, record, or testimony of God, to be believed by all, is, the inspired penman expressly declares, "This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life; and this life is in his Son" (1 John 5.11). The giving here mentioned, is not giving in possession in greater or lesser measure, but giving by way of grant, whereupon one may take possession. And the party to whom, is not the election only, but mankind lost. For this record is the gospel, the foundation of faith, and warrant to all, to believe in the Son of God, and lay hold on eternal life in him; but that God hath given eternal life to the elect, can be no such foundation nor warrant: for that a gift is made to certain select men, can never be a foundation or warrant for all men to accept and take it... There may, indeed, be a giving where there is no receiving, for a gift may be refused; and there may be a taking where there is no giving, the which is a presumptuous action without warrant; but there can be no place for receiving of Christ where there is not a giving of him before.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁷ A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (reprint: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 77.

⁴⁸ Thomas Boston, in Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2009), 136-137. For more on the free offer of the gospel, see Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

Boston's point is both profound and beautiful. Though not all will receive Christ, Christ is nevertheless freely given – by way of 'grant' or promise – to all mankind. Our belief in predestination must never, in any way, circumscribe our evangelism.

Finally, let us remember that while a thorough-going belief in predestination and reprobation is *biblical*, a denial of either (or both) is not automatically a denial of the gospel. Van Dixhoorn's reminder is most appropriate:

The decree of God has been the subject of too much debate in the history of the church. The reality is that the parties in these disputes are often much closer to one another than they admit. The happy truth is that those who dispute the absolute lordship of God check their arguments at the door when they enter their closets to pray. The sad truth is that those who defend a doctrine of divine sovereignty often complain when things do not go their own way, forgetting that their grumbling is against God.⁴⁹

As we conclude this session, let us remember how our own standards conclude this section. We study God's eternal plan so that "this doctrine [may] afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation, to all that sincerely obey the Gospel," (WCF 3.8).

Important Questions

1. Is God the author of all things? Is God the author of sin? Is he the author of sinners?
2. Does God send people to hell? If not God, who? Is this fair?
3. Does God send people to heaven? If so, how? Is this fair?
4. Does predestination contradict the free offer of the gospel?
5. Is denial of predestination automatically a denial of the gospel?

Additional Resources

Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*

Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 22-23, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
4	15-17	9-10

⁴⁹ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 47.